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Author(s): Gordon M. Day and Henry Tufts

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HENRY TUFTS AS A SOURCE ON THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ABENAKIS

by

Gordon M. Day
National Museum of Man, Ottawa, Canada

ABSTRACT

The autobiography of Henry Tufts is introduced as a substantial source of information for a little-known group of Western Abenakis.

It is well known that some of the culture areas of North America are provided with an abundance of ethnohistoric data while some areas suffer from notable deficits.¹ One of the latter is a piece of southern Québec and northwestern New England which was the territory of the Western Abenakis. This area is not susceptible to neat geographical labelling, but it can be bounded approximately as follows: on the north by the Saint Lawrence River; on the west by Lake Champlain and its effluent, the Richelieu River; on the east by the Chaudière and Kennebec Rivers; and on the south by the northern boundary of Massachusetts.

Prior to the disruption of the aboriginal, or even of an early contact-traditional pattern, very few observers penetrated the region, and those who did seem not to have left any very satisfying accounts. On maps produced in the 20th century, language, trait, and tribal boundaries have been extended across this region in a highly conjectural fashion, and this has created an atmosphere in which any new information about the Western Abenaki territory becomes a welcome occasion.

As it happens, a moderately substantial account has been in existence for a century and a half. I refer to a little book entitled *A Narrative of the Life, Adventures, Travels and Sufferings of Henry Tufts, Now Residing in Lemington, in the District of Maine. In Substance, as Compiled from his Own Mouth*, printed in Dover, New Hampshire in 1807. Tufts was not an early scholar. He was first and foremost a thief, but he was also a counterfeiter, an Army deserter, and a bigamist. He had an itchy foot, and his escapades

carried him back and forth over the length and breadth of New England several times, into New York, and once as far as Virginia. He made his way as a farm worker, a doctor, fortune teller, and itinerant preacher by turns. He was detained in innumerable jails, often in irons, escaped repeatedly, was flogged more than once, and finally in 1794 was sentenced in Massachusetts to hang for the then capital crime of burglary. He was badly frightened by this experience before Governor Samuel Adams finally commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. When he escaped four years later, he returned to his first wife and, by his own admission, reformed. The narrative ends about 1802 or 1803, and one wonders how he spent the next thirty years until he died in 1831 in his eighty-third year (Pearson 1930:xiii). Such was our author.

The book itself was not an unqualified success. The printing office which issued it was burned a few years later, and the printer died, it is said, of a broken heart. As Pearson (1930:XI) observed, "A manifest judgment." Persons by the name of Tufts bought and destroyed as many copies of the book as they could find. Such activity helps to explain the limited knowledge of the book even among bibliographers and the present scarcity of the first edition. It lay largely unnoticed until Colonel Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote an account and an estimate of it in *Harper's Magazine* for March, 1888. Then in 1930 Edmund Pearson brought out a second edition under the title *The Autobiography of a Criminal*, which found some audience among sociologists.

Its claim to an audience among ethnohistorians lies in the fact that Tufts spent three years, from the spring of 1772 to the spring of 1775, living with a band of Indians right in the middle of the poorly documented region just described. Three chapters of this book are devoted to this experience. This interlude is a bit surprising, because Tufts was not a pioneering type, and only extreme circumstances would have caused him to leave his civilized haunts and travel more than a hundred hard miles into what he considered a wilderness. The extreme circumstances are found in this paragraph:

Sometime posterior to all this, being on a visit at Ephraim Clough's in Lee, the company present started a novel diversion; namely, each in turn essayed to force open, with a strong and quick jerk, a sharp, half bent jackknife, without touching the blade. Some could do this, others not, I tried the experiment among the rest, but, unhappily for me, had the ill luck to strike the knife into the thick of my thigh, where it stopped only by lodging against the bone. The wound was three inches deep, and came within an ace of costing my life. I continued bleeding so long, that my blood lost its usual color, and I had no strength remaining. I lay ill, with this dreadful wound, three months, before recovery of power to walk abroad, and even then was so weak and pale, that I more resembled a ghost, than a living person. In a word, everyone supposed the malady would terminate in a consumption and so end my

days. Judging from my own feelings, I thought it time to set my house in order, and make some kind of preparations for departure hence. At this discouraging crisis I happened to meet with Capt. Josiah Miles, the great Indian hunter, who strongly advised my visiting the Indians of Sudbury, Canada, who, he affirmed, would cure me, if the thing were morally possible (Pearson 1930:57-58).²

So Tufts rested another month, then proceeded on foot by slow stages to Pigwacket, now Fryeburg, Maine, and then thirty miles farther where, as he said, "... ascending a great hill, I had a view, for the first time, of their camps and wigwams in Sudbury, Canada" (Pearson 1930:60). Upon his arrival at the Indian village in June, 1772, he was placed under the care of a renowned Indian doctress, Molly Occut, and by autumn he had fully recovered his health. He might have returned to the settlements at this time, but with one eye always open for the main chance, he conceived the idea of remaining with the Indians and studying the medical practice from which he had benefited, so that he would have a legitimate profession when he should return to civilization. His decision to stay seems to have been influenced also by the charms of one Polly Sussap, niece of the head chief. In any event, he did stay for three years in all, he did study Indian medicine under three or more herbalists, and subsequently he became known as an Indian doctor in a dozen communities.

Tufts' narrative must not be mistaken for an ethnographic account. His interests did not always coincide with ours, but during the course of relating his amours and his hardships he has left us, sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally, a modest amount of ethnographic detail where otherwise we might have none. The first step towards making it useful must be to identify the locality and the people with whom he spent the three years between 1772 and 1775. His "Sudbury, Canada" cannot, of course, be present-day Sudbury, Ontario. At this time, the interval between the Seven Years' War and the American Revolution, there was no international boundary. In this part of British North America there was Lower Canada and there was New England, and it was into the wilderness between the two that our hero made his way. We can deduce the locality fairly closely by collating different passages. Approaching from the south, Tufts went thirty miles beyond Pigwacket to his Sudbury, Canada. This was one of the so-called Canada Townships granted to descendants of veterans of William Phips' expedition to Canada in 1690. It was called Sudbury, Canada because it was granted principally to the descendants of veterans from Sudbury, Massachusetts (Lapham 1891:16-19). The first settler arrived in 1794, and the name of the town was changed to Bethel in 1796. The vicinity of Bethel, Maine, is therefore clearly indicated as Tufts' destination, and it corresponds very well with his specification of a place thirty miles beyond the Pigwacket settlements. Local tradition, moreover, testifies to the presence of a band of

Abenakis in the vicinity of Bethel just before white settlement there (True 1864:151). We do not need to assume that Tufts' Indian hosts were confined to the site of Bethel. After he had recovered a measure of health, he tells us that he "... followed the daily practice of traveling from place to place, until I had visited the whole encampment..." (Pearson 1930:64), which he estimated to be about three hundred persons. True placed the last Indian village site two and one-half miles upriver from Bethel. It seems probable that the band at Bethel at this time was a Western Abenaki band, since Tufts stated that they made up one tribe with the bands at Umbagog and Memphremagog with Tumkin Hagen at Umbagog as head chief.

Before we can be quite satisfied with the identification of Bethel as Tufts' destination, it is necessary to account for three statements which appear to contradict it. (1) At one point he mentioned going eastward to visit Lake Umbagog, which is, however, north of Bethel (Pearson 1930:73). (2) A little later he mentioned going *towards* the Androscoggin River to hunt, although Bethel is located *on* the Androscoggin River (Pearson 1930:73). (3) He said that he travelled about fifty miles back from Sudbury after having travelled only thirty miles going in. These apparent contradictions are probably insignificant. Tufts stated that in the late winter and spring of 1774 he accompanied a hunting party of Indians to Lake Memphremagog; it was apparently from here that he travelled eastward to visit Lake Umbagog, and it seems most probable that it was from Umbagog that he set out toward the Androscoggin River. The mileages to and from the Indian village may not be for the same courses. Tufts called the distance to Sudbury thirty miles after he had passed the English settlements, which apparently extended some distance beyond Pigwacket at that time (Pearson 1930:60). If we take this into consideration and also allow Tufts to set out for home from a slightly more distant locality in the Indian country, no contradiction remains.

While this is not the place to consider Tufts' observations in detail, it is fitting to outline his ethnographic contribution and to appraise it as well as we can in a brief compass. The following subjects are mentioned and discussed in more or less detail: hospitality, authority, staple foods, wigwams, medical practices, population and territory, brief word sketches of a few prominent persons, trading locations and relationships, the use of rum, winter hunting parties and procedures, game and fur animals taken, winter food storage, ornamentation, annual visits to Quebec, physical appearance, dress, construction of winter camps, summer smoking of meat, religion, marriage rites, and lastly funeral ceremonies — a catalogue of twenty-two items. The information provided for most of these items falls rather short of what one might wish for, but they are infinitely better than the near vacuum which would exist for this region and this time without Tufts' account. His account of funeral ceremonies may be taken as an example of his reporting. He wrote:

When they lose a friend or relative, by death, their grief and lamentations are great and unfeigned. They spare neither cost nor pains to celebrate the funeral obsequies of the defunct with all possible pomp and solemnity. I have, a number of times, partly out of curiosity, been present at those solemn spectacles, and have observed them with some attention. There is scarce any end to the multiplex ceremonies they think necessary to perform at the time of interment. The most material of which are the following. Having carried the corpse to the grave, they lament over it a while with loud complaints and bitter howlings, which are accompanied, also, with extraordinary gestures and violent contortions of body. This over, they place, in the grave, the deceased, with his body in an erect posture, wrapped up in a blanket, and dressed out as usual. They then put his fusil into his arms, his pipe into his mouth, and deposit, by his side, a sufficient quantity of tobacco, powder, balls, steel, tinder and provisions; these were undoubtedly designed to enable him to perform the long and tedious journey he had to encounter. Having done everything which they suppose might contribute, in the least, to his benefit or comfort, they cover him up, in an artificial manner, with wood, stones and earth, taking care, that the body be incommoded with none of the materials. In this manner are the rites of sepulture executed. After the performance of the above and other ceremonies (all being deemed indispensable) the spectators are allowed to return back, and partake of a feast provided on this solemn occasion . . ." (Pearson 1930:91-92).

It is typical of Tufts that, having seen these ceremonies several times and as he said, having observed them with some attention, he dismissed the complex and obligatory dance and song as "loud complaints and bitter howlings . . . accompanied . . . with extraordinary gestures and violent contortions." He gave no details of the arrangement of the grave covering of wood, stone, and earth to enable us to compare it with contact period Algonquin coverings and later historic Abenaki coverings (Biggar 1922-1936:4:178-179; Harrington 1869:17). He failed to mention the orientation of the corpse according to a cardinal direction. Still he has roughed out the outline of sepulture – burial in the ground accompanied by ceremonies, position of the corpse in the ground, the usual burial objects, and a following feast.

Only a small proportion of Tufts' observations contain anything not already described for some part of the eastern woodlands or the eastern boreal forest. His contribution is rather the documenting of selected elements for the Western Abenakis. He leaves the impression that they were very close culturally to the moose-hunting and corn-growing Abenakis of Maine for whom we have rather more in the way of early descriptions and that they were not nearly as close to the more agricultural, more sedentary, mixed hunters of southern New England. Possibly his greatest single contribution, after aligning in a general way the culture of these Abenakis with that of the rest of northern New England, is his account of the trial of a tribesman, since

judicial procedure and law have been little known items of Abenaki culture. We must regret especially that Tufts did not leave us a specimen vocabulary. He remarked that after one year's residence with the Indians, "Already had I acquired such competent skill in the Indian dialect, as to be able to converse freely with the natives . . ." (Pearson 1930:69). A modest vocabulary would have been most helpful in identifying Tufts' host band or for placing it in the spectrum of Abenaki dialects, but he elected instead to append a two and one-half page vocabulary of the "flash language" of the convicts in Boston Castle.

So much for the ethnographic content of the book, but it should be pointed out that there have been doubts expressed about its reliability. Mary P. Thompson, a Dover historian, condemned it thoroughly because of Tufts' character and subject matter, but she admitted, nay, insisted that she had never read it (Thompson 1892:257). Some persons have even thought that the author himself may have been only the fictional hero of an early bandit thriller, but there are sufficient documents to prove his existence. There is a record of his signing an adherence to the Declaration of Independence and of his first military service in 1775. One of his jail breaks in 1793 was given public notice, and his trial for burglary in 1794 received three notices in the Salem (Massachusetts) Gazette. There are court records of his trial and of his reprieve by Governor Adams. So he was a man of flesh and blood.

Certainly Tufts' character was such that we must lean on his work with some caution. His first critic, Colonel Higginson, wrote, "Of course it is easy to say that he lied; that probability must steadily be kept in view at every page: but the general verisimilitude is very great" (Higginson 1888:611). His 20th century editor wrote, "Writers who mention Henry Tufts are few and, for the most part, they follow his narrative and believe his assertions" (Pearson 1930:ix). Again, "There is a large percentage of truth in the narrative of Henry Tufts – how large we do not know" (idem:357). It is possible, of course, that he took Indian information common to the time and place and invented other episodes. It is possible that the hunter, Josiah Miles, was his source, but this would be less disturbing since it would at least give us the observations of an eye witness even though at second-hand. Still Higginson (1888:608) wrote, "... he has left in his autobiography a very clear and compact account of the whole way of living among these people in Canada a hundred years ago . . ." We may never know for certain how trustworthy his account is, but probably we would not query his testimony at all were it not for his character. But even a liar tells the truth sometimes, and I am inclined to believe that Tufts did so when it was not to his clear advantage not to. In another writer we should not doubt, especially when we find his statement about joining the army upon his return from the Indian

country fully confirmed in the New Hampshire Provincial Papers as to date, location of service, and even his company commander. There is no evidence that he invented the Indian episode in his story, and I am persuaded that he did not by the numerous points at which it accords with reliable contemporary and later information.

For example, his “tumkin Hagen,” the head chief at Umbagog, is the chief Tomhegan who became well known to the early settlers of the upper Androscoggin Valley (see for example Lapham 1891:46).

Molly Occut, the doctress who restored him to health, became known to the first settlers all the way from Bethel, Maine, to Lake Memphremagog. There are numerous stories in early town histories of her wonderful cures (Higginson 1888:608; Sumner 1860:28).

“Old Plilips,” the herbalist, was probably the Chief Philip who sold some 2500 square miles of land to the Wales Land Company twenty years later (Anonymous, n.d.:1).

Tufts called the chief of his own band, Swanson. It is a bit astonishing to encounter a Scandinavian name here, but it is only a mishearing on the part of Tufts or his ghost writer for the name of the chief whom Lapham called Swarsin (1891:78). The name was Swassin, the Abenaki pronunciation of the French baptismal name Joachim. Swassin’s full name was Manawalemit Swassin. He was first on the list of Abenaki chiefs who deeded Northern New Hampshire to the Bedell Land Company in 1798 (Anonymous, n.d.:6).

Tufts’ third named teacher, Sebattus, was probably the guide of the party which in 1781 pursued the Indian raiders of Bethel (Lapham 1891:46, 54). He may have been the scout used by Benedict Arnold in his Quebec campaign in 1775, but Sebattus was and is a common name, Sabadis, the Abenaki pronunciation of Jean Baptiste.

I have no further information about Tufts’ girl friend, Polly Sussap, but her name indicates that her father’s name was Sozap, or Joseph, and he may well have been the War Captain Sozap who was chief of a band which was at Lake Memphremagog until 1800 (Sumner 1860:26). This Sozap was Sozap Wawanolet, the ancestor of a numerous modern Abenaki family. Molly Occut had a daughter named Molly Sussap (Lapham 1891:78), but it does not appear from the narrative that she was Tufts’ Polly.

I am most strongly persuaded in Tufts’ favor by the agreement of his description of the burial rites he observed with those recorded on the Merrimack River in 1732 (Bouton 1856:48) and by the speech of the elder in sentencing Tufts’ partner for attempted murder. The latter is in perfect accord with the form and style used in the St. Francis council a few decades later (see for example Masta 1932:35-42), and it seems unlikely that anyone not an eyewitness acquainted with the language could have reported it with the same accuracy and detail.

There is little more to be said about this source without examining the ethnographic information in detail, so I will let the old sinner add his own epilogue to his three-year trip among the Abenakis. Said he,

Upon inquiry I now learned, that, for the greater part of her three years abandonment, my wife had been reduced to many difficulties to sustain herself and children, in any tolerable manner. At hearing those things I was exceedingly chagrined, though there seemed little probability that her condition would be meliorated by my present return. In fact, the wilds of Canada were but a scurvy place, in which to gather riches; so that I had come home, save a store of health, as empty handed, as I went (Pearson 1930:94).

He was right. He never was much help to his family then or later. It is worth noting, however, that during those periods of relative prosperity which he enjoyed between escapades in a dozen different localities, it was his knowledge of Indian medicine which supported him. Apparently he never recorded his knowledge of this art, and his failure to do so can doubtless be attributed to the same reticence which Indian herbalists in general have shown concerning their professional secrets.

During the Revolution, the Western Abenaki bands slowly withdrew from their lands straddling the headwaters of the Androscoggin, Connecticut, St. Francis, and Missisquoi Rivers, and when they sold their land in 1798 they were at St. Francis. The English traveller, Edward Augustus Kendall, found members of these former bands there ten years later (Kendall 1809:3:143, 191).

In sum, doubts about Tufts' narrative all seem to have stemmed from his reputation as a criminal. He described an Indian band which is known to have existed and his narrative does not contradict known history or ethnography. Rather it is confirmed at several points by what we know from other sources, and, in balance, is probably a reliable, though limited, source.

NOTES

1. An early version of this paper was read at the Fourteenth Annual Meeting of the American Society for Ethnohistory in Ottawa, Ontario, October 7, 1966. I am indebted to Mrs. Helen Leadbeater of Fryeburg, Maine, for making me acquainted with Henry Tufts.
2. Quotations from the Pearson edition are made with the permission of Dodd, Mead and Company, New York.

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